



## Two Tales of a City

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Цена 3 коп.

## STUCK IN THE MUD

Curated by Madeleine Preston Verge Gallery 1-9-16 - 24-9-16

# STUCK IN THE MUD

## Madeleine Preston

Polemic: the practice of engaging in controversial debate or dispute <sup>1</sup>

Samizdat: I write it myself, edit it myself, censor it myself, publish it myself, distribute it myself, and spend jail time for it myself  
*Vladimir Bukovsky* <sup>2</sup>

Ironically for a show rooted in modernist aesthetics much of *Stuck in the Mud* is contingent upon technology, in particular the Internet. Bev Shroot has sourced images of St Petersburg for *The State Porcelain Factory* from online drone footage. Connie Anthes' *Untitled (We Stand For)*, has used the most popular image searches of monuments to create the ceramic maquettes that form *United (We Stand For)*; Ashley Scott's work *Ideological Emergency Beacons LopNor and Aerograd* has sourced audio from archive sites, and Glenn Barkley's *Show Pony (Letter to Alan)*, has quite literally turned online abuse into celebratory pots.

It would seem that technology dogs craft and art equally with different results.

In Glenn Adamson's *The Invention of Craft* he suggests the craft art divide is a result of the industrial revolution. Craft became the other, an antidote to the upheaval the industrial revolution wrought. <sup>3</sup>

What does an authenticity for craft and the hand made mean? Is the maker's movement, a deracinated debate that employs the language of revolution without the realpolitik? And what is the crisis that making things by hand will avert? It feels like the crisis of alienation again and over. It is not the alienation children in factories in the third world experience; their alienation takes a different form as their hands assemble the Iphone accessories of our technological distancing.

To borrow from Baudelaire capitalism's greatest trick is to convince the world it is simply the invisible hand of the market<sup>4</sup>, or that the alienation of first world late capitalism can be resolved through hand-crafting. Certain disciplines within art have a currency today that is a result of the return to the hand crafted, which in turn is a refusal of 'inauthenticity'; of these disciplines ceramics is front and centre. How artists understand and respond to the spotlight, the influx of capital and narrative into their specialization varies, as do the internal revolutions within the discipline.

Holly Macdonald, Rachael McCallum and Eloise Rankine all majored in ceramics at art school. For *Stuck in the Mud* they have created work that implies the functional

when it no longer functions. Eloise Rankine's work *A monument to my failures* that is made of broken porcelain shards, monuments to what happens when the table an object was intended for eludes them. Holly Macdonald's work is often seen as functional when it is not *Soft Suprematism/ Vessel Essential, derived from ceramic forms* by Lucie Rie works across form and function, for *Stuck in the Mud* Holly reclaims dysfunction making vessels that function as paintings, small scale forms that refuse their place at the table. Rachael McCallum like Macdonald has created paintings. To reveal their colour and form McCallum's 'impressionist' had to burn to over 1000 degrees.

Kuba Dorabalski's video work *You Can't the Fire* burns into existence from the first frames of a foundry. Unlike the closed door of the kiln and the violence it wreaks Kuba articulates a visible definition of fire and change. Capitalism creates the pre-conditions that force the oppressed and other within it to act violently *You Can't the Fire* is revolution borne of capital and its unequal weight, rising from fire into fire, and the dancing, well, he likes to dance.

*The Karl, The Vladimir & The Rosa... available now - Go crazy for reds. Match every piece or mix them all up. Stick to a classic look or change it up. When it comes to setting the table, there are no rules...*, is an installation made by three artists. Rachael McCallum threw the forms; Ashley Scott's sound work gave them voice in his *Ideological Emergency Beacons LopNor and Aerograd*, and I assembled the thrown forms and proselytized with text, glaze, and photographic decals. The text and Internet sourced images of revolutionaries Rosa Luxemburg, II Lenin and Karl Marx along with crudely written Cyrillic letters do not and cannot make sense. They have an aesthetic of dissent without a coherent strategy to achieve change.

Katy B Plummer's cushions AND WE WILL USE WHAT WE HAVE IN OUR CUPBOARDS/ IT WILL BE ENOUGH and banners AND WE CAN MAKE THEM INTO DISHCLOTHS/ AFTER envisages the beginning middle and end of the revolution. Where are we now? Where will we be when we have exacted change? The revolution was now, was then

and we are where exactly? Banners become dishcloths, but who is going to take out the garbage? Who is going to wash and dry the dishes? From little things big things grow.<sup>5</sup>

Amanda Bromfield's revolution references the ceramics of the Angry Penguins. *The Woman's Bureau* alludes to Perceval and Boyd but beyond the references to individual artists, Bromfield is interested in ideas around the exclusion of the female voice. Her work has to be seen in the round, viewed in a circle, not one beginning and end but a continuum. From little things big things grow bigger <sup>6</sup>

We all walk the fine line between clever and stupid <sup>7</sup>, revolution and revolted. What makes a work of art distinct or distinguished? How do we know what art says or to whom? Or how a work speaks? Is art in craft or craft in art? Does the body rule the mind or does the mind rule the body? I don't know...<sup>8</sup> What I do know is all the artists and writers who make up the disembodied collective that is *Stuck in the Mud* are all grappling with what it takes to make, and what it says about us in this moment.

What you the viewer looking and reading this see is up to you. *Stuck in the Mud* is about your revolution, not mine, otherwise what is a revolution worth other than a 360 degree turn bringing us back to where we started.

### FOOTNOTES

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, viewed 30/8/16 <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/polemic>
2. *Wikipedia*, viewed 30/8/16, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samizdat>
3. Adamson. G, *The Invention of Craft*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2013
4. Rudwin M.J, *The Generous Gambler* (by Baudelaire C), *Devil Stories - An Anthology*, selected and edited with introduction and critical comments, Knopf, US, 1921, [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31754/31754-h/31754h.htm#THE\\_GENEROUS\\_GAMBLER17](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31754/31754-h/31754h.htm#THE_GENEROUS_GAMBLER17), viewed 30/8/16
5. Kelly P, *From Little Things Big things Grow*, Bloodlines, EMI, Festival, Australia 1993
6. *ibid.*
7. Guest.C, McKean.M, Shearer.H & Reiner.R, *This is Spinal Tap*, Embassy Pictures, United States, 1984
8. The Smiths, *Still Ill*, Hatful of Hollow, Rough Trade, UK, 1983-4



# TWO TALES OF A CITY

James Beighton & Emily Hesse

Genesis and Metamorphosis agree: we humans were shaped from clay. What now can it do for us? Has its day passed, replaced by silicon and dark matter, or is it as vital today to our well being as it has always been?

This is the story of a town far away from where likely you are now, reading this, perhaps the other side of the world to you. It tells of a single day in July 2016 and of a moment 170 years earlier. It tells of the movement of people across countries and oceans: how they shaped the land that they found and how it in turn shaped them. It is told in two voices.

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In 1846 a green and pleasant land was being churned, not by the plough but by the seemingly incessant march of industry. Fisher folk left their nets and farmers turned their back on their herds for the attraction of pig iron. Those abandoning the countryside around about were joined by tens of thousands arriving from further afield: from Ireland and Scotland, from Germany and Poland. It was a time also for reflection, sometimes sober, sometimes sentimental and sometimes ecstatic. Guilty of the latter was the under-aged antiquary John Walker Ord who was as enamored with revolutionary progress as he was with Anglo-Saxon domestication. His depiction of the still nascent town of Middlesbrough in the North East of England (which he calls Middleburgh) is one of prosperity and promise for the future.

“There are numerous excellent shops for merchandise, four public breweries, and three large iron-foundries, in one of which 400 persons are regularly employed.

In the iron-works belonging to Bolckow and Vaughan not only are all sorts of cast and wrought iron executed, but rolling mills are in operation for the production of bar iron and rails of every description. This is also a sail-cloth manufactory, in which the cloth is woven by patent machinery to a very considerable extent; an extensive manufactory of pottery and earthenware, and extensive brick and tile-yards for which clay of excellent quality is found, and employing upwards of 300 persons. Of these bricks the whole of Middleburgh, the Exchange excepted, is built.”

John Walker Ord, History and Antiquities of Cleveland, 1846

It is a picture of commercial and industrial diversity. The pottery, known as the

Middlesbrough Pottery made domestic crockery in imitation of Stoke transfer printed ware and shipped it around the world. As well as shipping out pots it was responsible for shipping in radical left wing politics through the Chartists, brought in as employees from the factories of Stoke. It was also one of the largest employers of women in the town.

Within a decade of Ord's visit, a boom in the iron and steel industry masked all other forms of manufacture in the popular imagination. It still does. It was Middlesbrough iron after all that built the Sydney Harbour Bridge, or so we are told. Now about the only thing that Middlesbrough is known for aside from steel, is as the birthplace of Captain James Cook.

Back then the wealth of the town was unfathomable; the bounty of steel like that of Californian gold. As so often art followed wealth. Like the American oil tycoons, the Japanese stock brokers and the Russian oligarchs, the steel giants accumulated canvases. The largest collection of contemporary art in England in the 1860s was housed at Marton Hall (built beside where the cottage in which James Cook was born once stood), it belonged to Iron Master Henry Bolckow. Perhaps the second most important was some ten miles to the East at Hutton Hall in Guisborough, owned by Joseph Whitwell Pease, a banker, a Quaker and son of one of the founders of Middlesbrough, grandson of the pioneer of the world's first passenger railway.

The wealth was not evenly distributed. Visitors from London attended Marton Hall regularly to admire its treasures, little of it was seen by the men and women whose labour fueled the prosperity. They lived in back-to-back brick hovels where the streets were still paved in clay: it caked the shoes of those who walked down them.

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*There are many times in life I find clay presenting and asking questions I cannot answer. I often find myself pushing it to do so. “Speak louder!” But on the 23rd of July 2016, a question of a completely different magnitude was asked. This is its story.*

*The day was warmer than usual for a British summer. We served lunch and coffee outdoors to those who formed the Middlesbrough community. Some where newly arrived, seeking political asylum from atrocities unthinkable, some were there to attend the Arte Util Summit (Arte Util being the archive of ‘useful art’ developed by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera:*

*Tania was running late and hadn't been able to join us but made a slip cast teapot the following day) some just walked into the garden at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art to see what was going on. The coffee we served was Eritrean in origin and formed the final sharing event of a project entitled The Coffee House which we had ran over the past six weeks. We produced the ceramic vessels used to hold an Eritrean coffee ceremony, in locally dug clay. Clay from the River Tees actually. A demonstration of transience but also one of embedding roots.*

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By the 1870s a global depression was strangling the British economy. As steel suffered so too the town of Middlesbrough suffered. The great collectors were already selling their canvases, never destined to adorn the walls of a municipal gallery (at least not in this town). The erstwhile Pease family was keeping open their pottery, incurring great personal loss, to avoid inflicting further misery on the families already deprived of income by the faltering steel industry. A new pioneering spirit was sought and once again the answer lay in the ground.

“Common brick clay is dug out of a hole, and upon that the life-inspiring breath of an artist is passed until the unseemly lump assumes forms rivaling those of classic Greece in elegance, or those of the dim Egyptian days in quaintness and grotesqueness. One is reminded that out of the vulgar pig iron of the same place glittering trusty steel has lately been produced. The age in Middlesbrough is faster more luxurious, than when the first Pottery was established, but certainly not more enervated.”

‘Review of Linthorpe Pottery’, The York Herald, 13 Nov. 1879

The Linthorpe Art Pottery was opened in 1879. Its initiators were a brick manufacturer, son of a jeweler, called John Harrison and the industrial designer Christopher Dresser. A painter by the name of Henry Tooth arrived from Buckinghamshire to supervise day-to-day artistic standards. It would seem that Pease money helped to establish the pottery, alleviating them of some responsibility for the maintaining the loss making Middlesbrough Pottery. Certainly the Quaker ethos was apparent in the venture, with decent wages and clean working conditions. Male and female workers had separate painting rooms to avoid distraction and the business invested much in education, training their workers through the Mechanics Institute and the local art college. The pottery was the first in the country to use gas kilns, this in a town established as a coal port, but they did not want coal dust spoiling their spectacular glazes. One of their few cost



saving initiatives was to use to locally dug clay rather than imported white earthenware.

There were to be no Willow Patterns here. The designs produced by Dresser, and subjected to countless variations by the employed artists, were ahead of their time, in some instances pre-empting the clarity of form espoused by the Bauhaus some fifty years later. They were not to everyone's taste. The price of high principles was low profit and John Harrison began embezzling funds from a local Quaker building society to pay his employees. After his sudden death from a heart attack in 1889 the pottery collapsed. Moulds and glaze recipes were auctioned off to rival potteries. The local clay was left, if not undisturbed, then at least un-utilised, for another century or so.

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*The Coffee House was a project developed by a group of Eritreans within the community. They simply could not get the clay vessels used. The Jabena, a hand built vessel used to make coffee over an open fire, is not something you can buy easily in England. More importantly you could not buy its symbolism. The vessel in Eritrea is made in the local clay, its materiality is as important as its function. We sought people out to work within the project by contacting the local community learning centre, where English as a foreign language was taught. Our budget was for 12 people to make the ceremonial items (jabena, cups, bowls etc). Forty-eight newly arrived people from countries all over the world turned up to the first session. Among them where a family from Syria, son, parents and grandfather (no names will be mentioned to protect identities). I remember them very clearly from the first time we met as none of them were able to smile. My heart bled for them.*

*Over the weeks I spent much more time with this family. Their English was not poor only the fear to speak was greater. They didn't want to be photographed but gradually became more involved. Didn't participate in the throwing of objects, but took instantly to decorating and glazing. One day the largest object we had made, a water jug, found its way to the father to underglaze. I could sense there was an initial fear of such a large canvas, but I demonstrated how to loosely add colour and the glazing began. When I returned to the table the jug was bright and colourful. I'm sure glazing aficionados would have had a massive problem with its appearance, but we don't do aesthetics here. They are the least important factor when trying to create an encounter that assists a human being in rebuilding and having some control over their new life.*

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'But what, in fact, is art?

Who needs it? We need action now, not art councils.

And behold the dead little stick is presiding in the field of art. It is it that needs offices and 'action'."

K.S. Malevich, 'A Little Dead Stick', Anarkhiya, no.33, April 1, 1918

It was the year after the Revolution and Kazimir Malevich wanted to see the walls of the museums come tumbling down, releasing their prisoners: the works of art contained in their vaults. "This is how the artist must act. Next on their list is a great task: to open up the chest that is Moscow, take our art, and to sweep the starry roads of images over the whole face of Russia".

The artists must act, Malevich said, must "divide the treasures amongst the towns", but must not lose sight of the field in which they acted. Their role was only to be "active in art". Thus perhaps the ambiguous statement wherein he ascribes other forms of action to the dead little stick of bureaucracy.

Nearly a century later and across Europe, certainly, we have seen a revolution in art. New temples to the art of our time have opened across countries, in towns where they might never be expected to appear: towns like Middlesbrough. The treasures of a nation are being spread across it. At least that is the dream.

What then of action?

Let us cross another ocean to find another revolution.

Cuban artist Tania Bruguera is part of a wider movement: one encompassing artists, critics, curators, even some museums. At the heart of her thinking is how art can be useful again:

"Art has never been enough for me. Art can have two phases: the one where you see something and show it to other people and the one where, after that collective recognition, you do something with it, you apply it ... At the beginning of the twenty-first century we should go with a different model of doing art, a model that integrates human activity and everyday life in a different way"

Tania Bruguera, 'Cátedra Arte de Conducta' in Tom Finkelpearl, What We Made, 2013

Claire Bishop has reflected upon this moment as a response to Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle (1967), a moment she summarises thus:

"Given the market's near total saturation of our image repertoire, so the argument goes, artistic practices can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to be consumed by a passive bystander. Instead, there must be an art of action, interfacing with reality, taking steps - however small - to repair the social bond"

Claire Bishop, Artificial Hells, 2012

This revolution today is rather different to that envisaged by Malevich, indeed critical of its outcomes, of the instrumentalisation of art through those new museums built for the purpose of civic regeneration. Of art brought to the people, but not necessarily with the people. Ours is a moment when art often does not look much like art anymore. It is beyond the Duchampian provocation of taking life and making it art: it is making art life. When art thus conceived can look like an art school, a row of houses, a running shoe, perhaps a pottery, then the specific field of action upon which Malevich insisted becomes difficult to define. Whether this non-autonomous art is suggestive of a different kind of instrumentalisation can also be debated. For clay though it raises several questions, one must ask whether, when faced with such amorphous understanding of what art can look like, does the debate that has been stuck in the mud for so long now, "is it art, is it craft", even make sense anymore? Let us shift our focus then and ask another question: ask not what can clay look like, but what can it do.

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In 1881, Middlesbrough was celebrating its jubilee: 50 years since the railroad was cut through, bringing commerce and an influx of people. The proprietor of the local newspaper Hugh Gilzean Reid, reported the affairs in characteristic detail, and word for word a rousing speech by Joseph Cowen at the state banquet. To great applause Cowen said:

"Middlesbrough, owed something to its position, much to its possessions, but more to its people ... The ruthless rule of Philip the Second and the Duke of Alba drove the skilled artizans of Belgium and Holland to seek asylum in England. It was political persecution that sent us the Huguenots, and secured to England all the great commercial and social results that followed from their landing on our shores."

Joseph Cowen, quoted in H.G. Reid, Middlesbrough and its Jubilee, 1881

But what of the future? Here Cowen reflected upon the Quaker ethos that had founded the town: "without sighs or groans or unavailing regrets, [we] should keep stout hearts and cheerful minds, and manfully do the duty that lay nearest to [us], assured that the next would appear all the more clear in consequence". It was a call to act.

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Referencing Walter Benjamin, Michael Jackson reflects upon the social life of stories:

"stories are like vessels shaped from wet clay under a potter's hands. While each pot conforms to the stylistic and utilitarian conventions of a single society at a certain

moment in time, it simultaneously bears the tell-tale traces of an individual potter's hands."

Michael Jackson, The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt, 2013

Is there a value to clay, a quality over and above other materials, that can allow it to be used as a medium for acting, a medium for affecting social change? If it is there it may lay in clay's malleability, but most surely in its ubiquity. The lineage of clay is often cited to establish its validity: its 10,000 years of history, its worldly insistence, from tile to toilet to brick to knick-knack. Such tchotchkes are seldom celebrated in their own right yet these are the things that can shape stories, with their repertoire of associations. Stories that a community can be actors in shaping, rather than merely as participants in another's story. Jackson continues:

"Our lives are storied, Were it not for stories, our lives would be unimaginable. Stories make it possible for us to overcome our separateness, to find common ground and common cause ... A story enables us to fuse the world within and the world without. In this way we gain some purchase over events that confounded us, humbled us, and left us helpless. In telling a story we renew our faith that the world is within our grasp"

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*The jug served water to over seventy people on the 23rd of July 2016. Its maker was there to witness its use along with his family. As I cleared away plates and gathered the beautiful cups everyone had so lovingly made, the time came to give the jug to its rightful owner. So I picked it up, held it gently and presented it to him. "This is for you, it's yours now, " and this was my friends reply,*

*"No, I cannot take it.*

*Do you see that flower over there in the garden?*

*If I take this from here, from this place,*

*It is like picking that flower.*

*No other will appreciate its beauty."*

# I AM A SENTIENT BEING

Debbie Pryor

Pottery enjoyed high prestige among ancient Greeks; and in China, for most of its history pottery was among the noblest of the arts-of-making.<sup>1</sup> The Industrial Revolution destroyed the notion of handmade survival for thousands of small-time individual potters in the 19th Century, creating a ceramic backbench for decades - yet the resilience of the material has allowed it to re-enter the mainstream multiple times, most recently in the 1970's, and today.

The intention and motivation of the medium transforms in the hands of the maker. It is a structure supporting mixed materials through sculpture, the sum of many contributing to a greater form. Or a raw material to be formed, cooked and glazed; the alchemy of combinations, variants and skills dictating the outcome.

The inherent beauty of clay is its memory, and its complex ability to transform through pushing forms, dripping glazes and heating carefully - or wildly (to Raku or not Raku?). Centuries of makers have slaved, dedicated their lives to its ways, decades of artists have widened their eyes to the possibilities of the materials strengths and vulnerabilities.

It's plasticity can be stretched dramatically to cracking point, in liquid form draped and dripped, cooked can hold the strength of concrete or the vulnerability of an egg shell. Yet it poses more questions than answers, without diligent observations and notes over time an educated understanding can rarely be made. What is an educated understanding, what does a dedication to materiality look like? Is it a perfectly formed handle on your domestic vessel, a form repeated infinite until its perceived perfection, an ancient museological pot smashed played back in slow motion<sup>2</sup>, 'room temperature glaze' slopped onto a bisque fired form<sup>3</sup>? How can an appropriate use of material be judged, and who is the judge?

The material itself demands the maker question boundaries between body and surface, question the traditional and contemporary functions of a form, question the boundaries between decoration and communication. There is a power within ceramics to transcend a historical function, to communicate more than a domestic or

personal use. Yet the material is steeped in a conservative perception that confines it. Is it just now being unleashed? Can that be so? The oldest craft finally receives artistic release... in 2016.

Visual Artists and potters alike acknowledge that ceramics is no longer a surface to simply decorate or paint upon, but is now more commonly utilised as a core, primary structural creative material - yet this multi functionality is met with controversy. Can a material serve only one purpose / does one purpose diminish or degrade the other?

Subversion of a material as seductive is necessary. Clay is accessible to all artists, it accommodates rudimentary ways of making for the non-committed and provides rewarding challenges for those who dedicate their lives to the alchemy of its elements and their attempts at achieving perfection. This accessibility of the material allows for multiple perceptions of beauty and artistic perfection.

An ode to the complexity;

You will be pushed to your limits  
Mocked, by room temperature glaze  
and two-part epoxy adhesives

While the speed of concrete and  
plaster mimic,

They cannot replace

Forms imply the functional, devoid of  
function (vessel is a dirty word)

Is it better to be borrowed than ignored?  
(Art vs Design)

Material memory, a mended crack  
will forever be the weakest

Fetishized by theory, history and  
endless possibility

Turners and burners, long for control  
of the medium

While delighting in the revelations of failure

They moisturise scaly hands

And crack the kilns of their next manifest.

## FOOTNOTES

1. The Aesthetics of Function, The Canon of Arts - Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Studio Potter* Volume 13 Number 2

2. Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995, Ai Wei Wei

3. Artist Talk RMIT, 10/8/2016, Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran



# COMRADES NOT COMPETITORS:

## A call for solidarity within the art vs. craft debate

Eloise Rankine

Art [noun] The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power

Craft [noun] an activity involving skill in making things by hand; work or objects made by hand; skills involved in carrying out one's work

Craft [verb]: exercise skill in making (an object) typically by hand  
Oxford Dictionary

Craft is not an enemy to art. Craft is, in fact, the enemy to mass production. Constantly pitted against each other art and craft are not opponents; but natural bedfellows. The art world has always accepted handmade, considered, oft finessed, remade and reworked, crafted work by artists. Craft and art have developed in tandem and are less enemies now than they have ever been. Those pushing them apart are fighting a non-existent fight: craft and art elevate each other and the argument against this is unproductive and illogical.

The Arts and Crafts movement marks the start of a fierce ideological fight against mass production, a war that still rages today (Adamson 2013). What follows is a brief history of the beginning of this great dissent from the factory and from being the alienated worker that society encourages so many to be. While this essay will focus on predominately on ceramics, I believe a similar argument to the one I am about to make could be made for most, if not all, other craft activities. For example, the lasting interest in hand stitching in the midst of new technologies such as the sewing machine and the industrialisation of clothes production and now the prevalence of fast fashion. I will leave you to make your own comparisons.

Around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the Arts and Crafts movement began to gain traction (Blakesley 2006). This movement originated and was championed as a reaction to Britain's movement towards mass production lead by Josiah Wedgwood during the industrial revolution (Adamson 2013). Mass production meant the beginning of production-line ceramic wares being made in factories by multiple workers engaging in repetitive, machine-like work. This method of production reduced costs and encouraged an increase in consumption while contributing to an aesthetic movement that devalued the human touch (McKendrick 1960). While this meant that uniform household ceramics were now widely available and more reasonably priced, some people felt alienated by this disjointed method of production (Blakesley 2006). Designers, workers and machines

replaced the artisan potter. This fundamental change prompted William Morris to begin his advocacy for the return to artisanal, small run production methods.

At the time, Ruskin and then Morris believed America was full of over-decorated and poorly made goods which restricted creativity and took the joy and therefore the art out of making. They began a movement based on bringing expression through the creation of household items, such as rugs, vases, chairs, in an attempt to escape from the industrial world. Ruskin claimed "it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity" (Boris 1986). In this way Ruskin debated that socially, factories dehumanised people as they restricted their creativity due to only assigning a single task to each worker. Morris following Ruskin claimed, "the essence of what Ruskin taught us [was] that the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life" (ibid.). Morris was unhappy with the factory line and how it separated the creator from the creation. In a factory, for example, instead of the single potter realising a vase from start to finish, different workers would throw or cast, turn, paint, fire, glaze and add enamel details if necessary. The feeling of alienation surrounding this separation of labour encouraged people to return to the pottery of the pre-industrialised era. In this way, mass production within the ceramic field encouraged a counter-movement that brought a call to return to artisan studio pottery. This movement encouraged artisans to make individualised, small-run unique works as a protest against what they saw as a dehumanised factory setting and the resulting poor quality, imitable goods they produced (Adamson 2013).

Today ceramics are still produced in both factories and in private studios to cater for a public who are looking for cheap, utilitarian goods as well as more expensive, decorative, individual pieces. Studio potters continue to embrace functional wares as seen in the current popularity of "makers" who create small runs of functional ware alongside a growing number of ceramic artists creating

work specifically for the gallery and art market. While one might argue that these pursuits are all in opposition, in fact, these practices sit comfortably beside one another as each carves out its market share and dedicated audience: mass production provides cheap goods, makers by hand produce goods more expensive than those that are mass produced; and art works are another level of expense altogether. This hierarchy is based not on technical ability of the maker but instead on a hierarchy that values the one over the many and the conceptual over the technically brilliant.

By positioning craft as antithetical to the Industrial Revolution, the Arts and Crafts Movement positioned craft as a place for rebellion against a changing world that threatened to turn humans into machines and to make everyone the same. This legacy remains today as craft continues to be an activity that people return to when attempting to escape a dehumanised, technologically overwhelming world. This is a place where art and craft sit quietly together as artists and artisans hone their skills to create beauty, to access the sublime and to change people's thinking.

From this contemplative space, some emerge as artists and some remain as crafters and some move between the two. The distinction is fluid and often unhelpful. Why must some justify their place within a gallery and some not?

So let us end this debate now, put the art vs. craft battle back to bed and continue raging our war against mass production and cultural monotony. Let us return to our pottery wheels, to our needle and thread and to our paintbrush and canvas to begin, continue and finish what we ourselves dreamt up. It does not matter where our work ends up, artists and crafters are all kin. We have been fighting the wrong fight: artists and craftspeople are comrades not competitors. We need each other to be heard above the vast sameness that threatens to engulf us all.

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- 3 Boris, E. *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986.
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- 8 Whipp, R, *Work and Social Consciousness: The British Potters in the Early Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988



# PONDEROUS TOSSERS AND TWEE DRIPS

Lucy Hawthorne

I'll say it straight: crafties reckon arties are ponderous tossers and arties reckon crafties are twee drips Robert Cook, 2007.<sup>1</sup>

We so often discuss art and craft as dichotomous, using phrases like 'art versus craft' or 'the art craft distinction', yet it's only in the last century or so that the two have diverged. Today, to marry them with an 'and' brings to mind primary school arts and crafts lessons, adult education classes or other such uncritical activities, as if the 'craft' somehow saps the edge out of the 'art'. The debate about an art and craft distinction also relates to so many other ideological concerns within the visual arts, such as skill, labour, time, beauty, gendered values, functionality, the artist's hand, originality, and the hierarchy of content over form in which cerebral concerns are valued over craft knowledge.

The terms are tricky enough to define in themselves, and craft in particular has many conflicting connotations, many of which are negative. For me, the associations vary depending on the material and method involved.

I think of the recent resurgence in popularity of craft skills amongst gen X and gen Y, along with the growth of 'makers markets' and online sites like Etsy and Madeit.

I think of the Etsyesque owls, elks and rabbits that have become passé through market saturation.

I think of handmade aesthetic celebrated in both art and craft objects.

I think of the craft skills associated with women's works, such as knitting, sewing, quilting, and beading.

I think of the daggy raw ceramic mugs, signs and sculptures I see in regional art and craft shops (I too have my own prejudices).

I also think of craft as a verb, and the demonstration of skill through making.

To distinguish between art and craft, we often refer to an object's functionality or mimicry of functional forms, but then how do we explain the ready acceptance of ceramic urns by artists like Grayson Perry? We also cite originality as a defining feature of contemporary art. Craft is traditionally associated with repetition and the emulation of existing objects; however, the modern marketplace for crafts (like Etsy) values and encourages originality. I'm continually reading articles or angry Facebook posts about multinational companies supposedly copying the original work of independent craftspeople or designers. Craft used to be associated with a narrow range of materials, but many contemporary jewellers, for instance, have abandoned the traditional precious metals and stones in favour of more modern materials like plastic, resin and found objects. In fact, a recent exhibition at the NGV demonstrated that not all jewellery design is even functional, blurring

the lines between art, craft and design. (At this point I should also acknowledge there is a distinction between craft and design. Whereas the 'decorative arts' was disenfranchised from fine art at the end of the nineteenth century, craft and design separated in the 1920s. However, the ideological concerns around this split is probably another essay in itself.) When distinguishing art from craft, we also consider intention. Yet the maker does not have the final say in the interpretation of an object, nor its acceptance as art or design. Like art, the definition, consumption and production of craft has greatly evolved, particularly in the last fifty years.

Contemporary art is often thought of as 'anything goes'. But it's kind of like the free market: it's art if people will 'buy it' as such. The art world is fickle. New art forms like video and performance are automatically accepted as contemporary, but traditional mediums and methods tend to require a rationale. For example, carving - which is synonymous with traditional sculpture techniques - is 'tainted' by its history. To have a carved stone object accepted as contemporary art, the producer has to *need* to use these techniques. In art today, everything is up for interpretation and criticism, and everything contributes to an artwork's meaning: the material, the method, the lack of method, the lighting, the space around the artwork, the title, the artist statement, the maker's gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and so on....

There are exceptions of course: traditional carving methods are often fine if the object being carved is not associated with the craft. For instance, Ricky Swallow's carved PVC pipe sculptures were uncritically accepted as contemporary art, whereas his carved wooden sculptures - that is, a traditional method matched with its historically associated medium - have been widely criticised. Adam Geczy, for instance, refers to Swallow's carvings as 'a petit-bourgeois art' and a 'lapse into a retrograde medievalism', concluding that the popularity of Swallow's artwork is simply the fault of 'nostalgia'<sup>2</sup>. Ross Woodrow believes that by practising 'banal, laborious woodcarving', Swallow is exploiting the romantic notion of the genius<sup>3</sup>. Even proponents of Swallow's art, such as Sebastian Smee, are wary of his highly crafted sculpture, suggesting that 'Swallow's dedication to the craft of woodcarving is self-conscious, even self-congratulatory.'<sup>4</sup>

Fiona Hall also uses traditional craft methods, such as knitting, beading and carving, but combines them with unorthodox materials. She knits shredded aluminium, carves soap, and threads intricately beaded limbs onto Tupperware 'creatures'. In Hall's artworks, the

method and medium are integral to the artwork's meaning, as is the labour and the undeniable beauty of so many of the works.

It's also strategic, as Hall says:

I think I use the aesthetic appearance of my work as a lure, or a ploy to entice the viewer -like an insectivorous plant I suppose! - into the work, where they find themselves ensnared by the subtext. I'd like to think it was a case of the more seductive the façade, the better laid the trap.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Swallow's carved wooden sculptures, when Hall pairs traditional craft skills with their associated materials (such as her beaded *Fieldwork* (1998)<sup>6</sup>, the demonstration of craft knowledge and labour has never been met with the same negative attention. Instead it is celebrated ('her exceptional and excruciating methods'<sup>7</sup>; 'only an artist with exceptional skills could make it work so beautifully'<sup>8</sup>). This could be explained a couple of ways: firstly, unlike wood or stone carving, the historical 'low art' status of 'female crafts' like knitting and beading means that they're not tainted by *fine art* history. While the (mostly male) Conceptual and performance artists of the 1970s were rejecting traditional art and craft techniques, groups of feminist artist were critically re-evaluating the status of techniques dismissed as 'women's work', such as sewing, knitting, quilting and embroidery. These activities are unfortunately still associated with gendered crafts and amateurism rather than high art, but when they are exhibited as art objects, there's rarely a critique of the level of skill; instead, it's acknowledged that the very act of knitting or quilting an artwork is a political statement in itself. We see this in Katy B Plummer's textile sculptures. The titles - AND WE WILL USE WHAT WE HAVE IN OUR CUPBOARDS/IT WILL BE ENOUGH and And WE CAN MAKE THEM INTO DISHCLOTHS/AFTER - likely reference the use and reuse of scrap material in quilting, a tendency so passionately described in Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer's essay on *Femmeage*:

Collected, saved and combined materials represented for such women acts of pride, desperation and necessity. Spiritual survival depended on the harboring of memories. Each cherished scrap of percale, muslin or chintz, each bead, each letter, each photograph, was a reminder of its place in a woman's life, similar to an entry in a journal or a diary...<sup>9</sup>

While craft techniques associated with 'masculine' art / 'high art', like carved wood or stone, remain somewhat tainted by their art historical associations, female crafts, particularly

those using unconventional materials, don't seem to suffer the same burden. With ceramics, the pairing of the clay medium and sculptural method(s) is near unavoidable, although as the collaborative work by Madeleine Preston, Rachael McCallum and Ashley Scott demonstrates, convention can be broken using additional media like sound.

Ceramics holds a unique status within the art and craft worlds in that it's practiced by a wide range of people - from children and hobbyists to highly skilled craftspeople. Clay is an incredibly accessible medium. You don't need any particular skills or equipment to create a hand formed object. It's tactile, wonderful to play with and touch, easily malleable, and once fired, will most probably outlive the maker.

However, as illustrated by *Stuck in the Mud*, there's a real tension within the art and ceramics communities regarding skills and training. Traditionalists resist change and the breaking of convention. Then there are the vocal art critics (such as Peter Timms) who condemn untrained artists who dare work with clay, writing nostalgically about the days when pottery was a respected medium and every Australian art school had a dedicated ceramics studio.

Many contemporary artists have embraced ceramics as a method of expression, shunning professional training in favour of experimental exploration, collaboration, or even outsourcing. This is not to say training and the acquisition of skills is bad, or that it somehow saps creativity or experimentation. As Peter Dormer jokes, craft knowledge does not lure practitioners 'irresistibly, as though beguiled by Sirens, into practicing skill as an end in itself.'<sup>10</sup> It's just that for many artists, the acquisition of craft knowledge and skill is not necessarily a priority. In fact, as some of the artworks in *Stuck in the Mud* illustrate, the aesthetics of amateurism may even be an integral part of the artwork's meaning.

The artist may only want to exploit the connotations associated with clay objects as part of a short-term project. Many artists work in a variety of art forms, using the language of different media and forms strategically. In these cases it's not practical to become experts in every art or craft technique. Pottery is an ancient craft common to cultures around the world, which makes it a medium rich with historical and cultural meaning. The world's oldest ceramic object, a small Venus figurine, is 26,000 years old - a number that's hard for me to even fathom. Consider the variety of ceramic products around the world - they represent tens of thousands of years worth of human development, creative expression, technology and innovation. There's the hill in Rome, Monte Tesaccio, that's made up of Roman amphorae fragments. The vessels were so cheap that they were considered disposable packaging. There's the two thousand year old stylised terracotta Nok figures found in Nigeria. Then there's the intricate and beautifully coloured Islamic

patterning on Istanbul's 15th century Topkapi palace, which is covered in over 20,000 Iznik tiles - the production of which was developed in imitation of Chinese porcelain. Nowadays, its application is even more widespread: it's used for semiconductors, dentures, lighting, body armour and space shuttles. Consequently, it seems absurd that we should impose technical limits on the crafting of ceramic art objects in the name of 'tradition'.

In *The Art of the Maker*, Dormer suggests that 'acceptance [of craft knowledge] now depends on denying or subverting craft... a work in what is perceived to be a craft medium ... is seldom accepted as art'<sup>11</sup>. However, since he wrote the book twenty years ago, the anxieties over issues like skills and labour have lessened somewhat. Yes, there are still prejudices in the artwork (such as the Ricky Swallow examples above), but the method of production is not necessarily viewed as a threat to ideas; rather it's seen as an important way of communicating those ideas, regardless of whether an artwork demonstrates a high level of skill, or whether it aims to subvert craft knowledge through the aesthetics of amateurism and play.

While writing this essay, I've been reflecting on the review I published last month of an exhibition of ceramics, paintings and collages by Jenny Orchard and Mish Meijers. While Orchard is a well-established ceramicist with decades of experience, Meijers (a painter, sculptor and installation artist) only started working in the medium two years ago during an artist residency. Yet in my review I didn't mention skill or labour. It's not that these things aren't important - it's just that in a short exhibition review, it wasn't a priority for discussion. Obviously there was a significant difference in the two artists' styles: Orchard's hybrid creatures were colourful with shiny glazes and prominent features, whereas Meijers' were decidedly rawer - as if the creatures were still emerging from the block of clay. Looking back, I could have discussed their artworks in relation to skill, but perhaps I'm also a little hesitant to discuss skill when reviewing works of art. It's a tricky subject, and still a little taboo. And I'm not alone. Examine the exhibition reviews of contemporary art world's favourite ceramicist, Grayson Perry, and you'll notice that there is more column space devoted to Perry's fashion preferences than his skills as a potter.

As I've stressed throughout this essay, the acceptance of craft in art has less to do with skill and more to do with using it as a strategy and a language, capitalising on the cultural associations embedded in each material and technique. Glenn Barkley's pot takes inspiration from a Chinese ceramic vessel, and the medium and classic design acts as a kind of foil to the work's technological content. At first glance, the raised patterning on the pot's exterior looks merely decorative, but then plant-like shapes reveal words and phrases, which are all taken

from Twitter. The title - *Show Pony (Letter to Alan)* - references a tweet in which the artist was called a 'show pony' and 'ludicrously a curator'. While tweets are usually brief encounters - short and ill thought out ideas that fade quickly into the noise of the internet - Barkley has recorded the troll's words in clay, which is a solid, tangible medium that will likely outlive the author. Another vessel spells out words associated with performance art documentation, such as 'USB', 'pelican case' and 'Dropbox'. As Barkley said, the artwork will likely last longer than digital technology... unless it's dropped, of course.

Connie Anthes' installation, *Untitled (We Are Here)*, comprises a number of small plinths modelled those used in real-life monuments to women. She observes that the craftspeople responsible for the plinths' fabrication are never recorded, and re-presents them with authorship instated. As I noted earlier, Preston, McCallum and Scott's collaborative installation combines Preston's ceramic totem forms with sound elements. The title - *The Karl, the Vladimir & The Rosa... Available Now - Go Crazy for Reds. Match Every Piece or Mix Them All Up. Stick to a Classic Look or Change it Up. When it Comes to Setting the Table, There Are No Rules* - refers to the modern consumption of ceramic objects. With their kitsch decals of Soviet leaders, wonky writing, and imperfect stacking, the overt statement - 'there are no rules' - is reflected in the unpretentiousness of the totems.

Artists today subvert traditional notions of craft. While theorists like Peter Dormer view this as a negative development,<sup>12</sup> the continuing interest in craft skills and mediums - even if they break from 'tradition' - should not be considered detrimental to this knowledge. In fact, artists are sustaining interest in the area by strategically positioning craft in a contemporary context. Ultimately, the shared language of art and craft will continue to evolve.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Robert Cook, *Object 53*, 2007: 19-22.
- 2 Adam Geczy. 'Neo-medievalism.' *Art Monthly Australia* 182, 2005: 34-5.
- 3 Ross Woodrow. 'Artists as Model Workers.' *Art Monthly Australia* 186, 2005: 40-42.
- 4 Sebastian Smee. 'Carving a Buttress Against Impermanence.' *The Australian*, 15 December 2006:
- 5 Fiona Hall cited in Catherine Nichols. 'Interview with Fiona Hall.' *Face Up*. Exhibition catalogue. Berlin: Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, 2003: 93
- 6 I should note, however, that it also includes a couple of less conventional rubber bath plugs.
- 7 Stephanie Radock. 'Trade: Fiona Hall', *Artlink* 21, no. 4, 2001: 51.
- 8 Timothy Morrell, 'The Art of Fiona Hall', *Art Monthly Australia* 179, 2005: 23.
- 9 Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, 'Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled--FEMMAGE.' *Heresies* I, no. 4, 1977-78: 66-69.
- 10 Peter Dormer. *The Art of the Maker: Skill and its Meaning in Art, Craft and Design*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1994: 8.
11. Peter Dormer. *The Art of the Maker: Skill and its Meaning in Art, Craft and Design*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1994: 27.
12. Ibid.





**Connie Anthes**, *Untitled (We Are Here)*, Installation with single fired stoneware plinths, enamel, steel. Dimensions variable, 2016 photo by Docqment

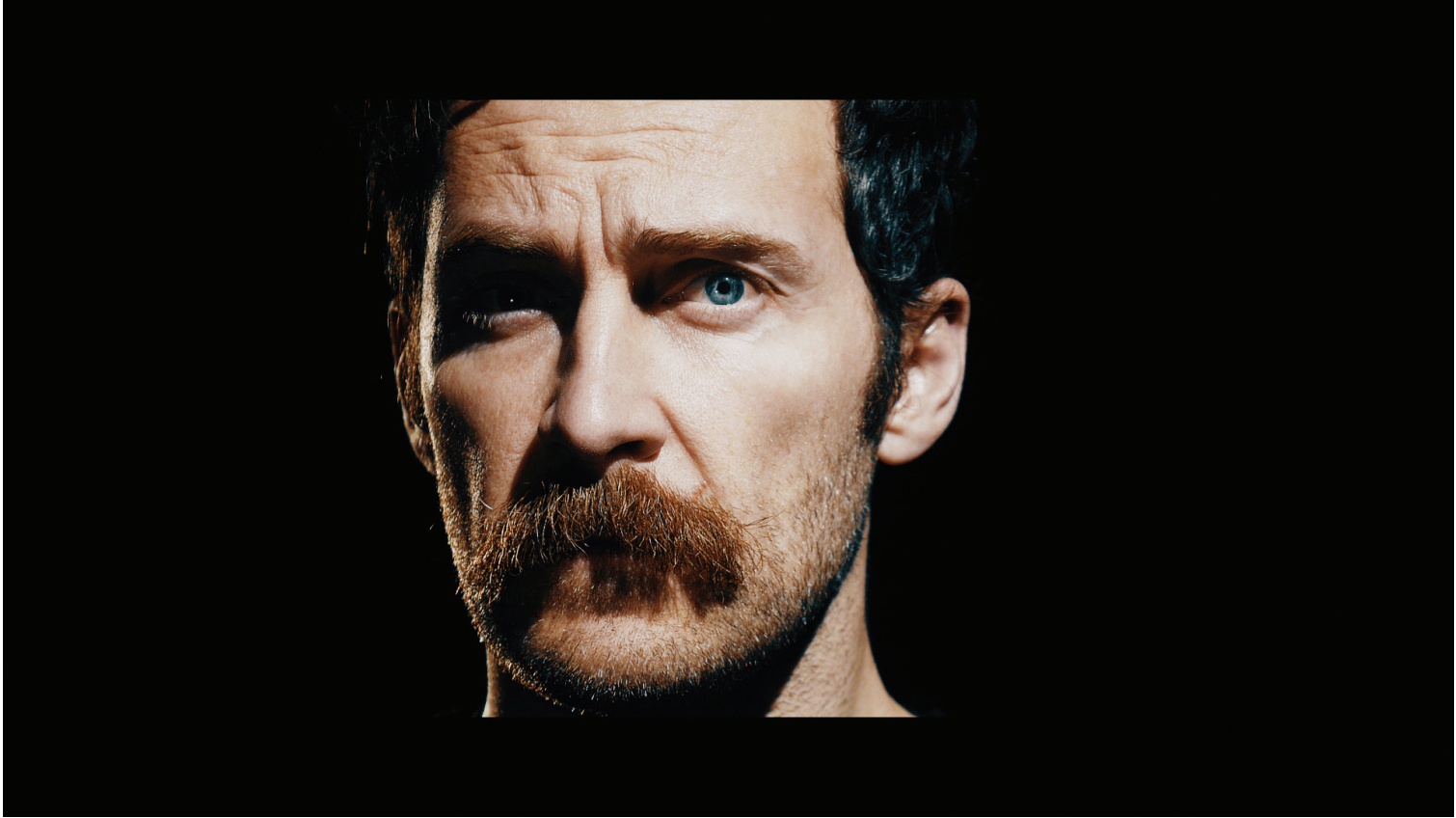




**Glenn Barkley**, *Show Pony (Letter to Alan)*, earthenware,  
61 cm h x 25cm w, 2016 photo by Docqment  
*Glenn Barkley is represented by Utopia Art Sydney*



**Amanda Bromfield**, *The Woman's Bureau*, White stoneware,  
Cone 6 glazes, under glaze and oxides, 31cm h x 20cm w x 17cm d, 2016  
photo by Docqment



**Kuba Dorabialski**, *You Can't The Fire*, UHD video, duration 8.45, 2016





**Holly Macdonald**, *Soft Suprematism/ Vessel Essential*, derived from ceramic forms by Lucie Rie, terracotta, porcelain, porcelain slip, 14cm h x 26cm w x 9cm d, 2016



**Rachael McCallum** *"impressionist"* Reclaimed Earthenware,  
augmented glaze, copper wire. 44cm h x 32cm w x 4cm d, 2016





**Katy B Plummer**, AND WE CAN MAKE THEM INTO DISHCLOTHS/ AFTER, Dyed calico, wood, cotton cord, string, sound, dimensions variable, 2016  
AND WE WILL USE WHAT WE HAVE IN OUR CUPBOARDS/ IT WILL BE ENOUGH, Hessian, dyed calico, buttons, acrylic yarn, wool yarn, fiberfill, ply, dimensions variable, 2016





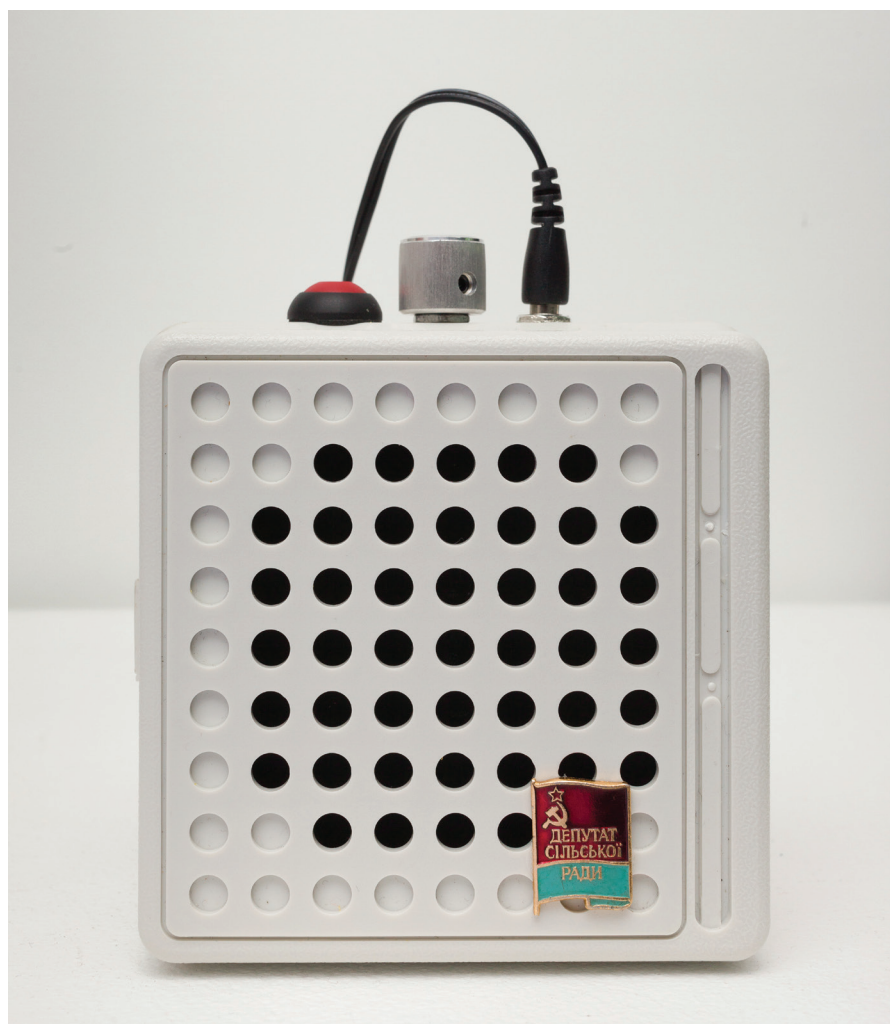
**Madeleine Preston** collaboration with **Rachael McCallum**, and **Ashley Scott**,

*The Karl, The Vladimir & The Rosa...available now - Go crazy for reds. Match every piece or mix them all up. Stick to a classic look or change it up. When it comes to setting the table, there are no rules..., glazed earthenware, decals, and audio, dimensions variable 2016*  
 photo by Docqment



**Eloise Rankine**, *A monument to my failures*, Dimensions variable, Ceramics, 2013-2016  
*Eloise Rankine is represented by Utopia Art Sydney*





**Ashley Scott**, *Ideological Emergency Beacons LopNor and Aerograd*,  
Audio, 10.8cm h x 10.8cm w, 2016 (Price to be set by show trial - The more reactionaries  
denounced, the deeper the discount) photo by Docqment





**Bev Shroot**, installation of Book & Video

Book - *Revolutionary Ceramics 1917 - 1927*, Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky, 1990.

Video - *The State Porcelain Factory*, single channel HD video, duration 2:13 Edition of 2, 2016

**Connie Anthes** - ceramics  
**Glenn Barkley** - ceramics  
**Amanda Bromfield** - ceramics  
**Kuba Dorabialski** - video  
**Rachael McCallum** - ceramics  
**Holly Macdonald** - ceramics  
**Katy B Plummer** - textiles  
**Madeleine Preston** - ceramics  
**Eloise Rankine** - ceramics  
**Ashley Scott** - audio  
**Bev Shroot** - video

## ARTISTS

**Connie Anthes** is a multi-disciplinary artist currently based in Sydney. She makes paintings, objects and installations that play with the mechanics of vision and spatial experience, often using unexpected materials and methods. Her work is currently represented in the collections of Artbank and Bathurst Regional Gallery, and she remains an active member of the artist-run community, having recently co-founded Frontyard, a futuring initiative for the arts.

**Glenn Barkley** is an artist, writer, curator and gardener based in Sydney and Berry NSW. His work operates in the space between these interests and drawing upon ceramics deep history. He is co-founder of Kilnit Experimental Ceramics Studio Glebe and Co-Director of The Curators Department an independent curatorial agency based in Sydney. He is represented by Utopia Art Sydney; Niagara Galleries, Melbourne and Heiser Gallery Brisbane.

**Kuba Dorabialski** is an artist and writer, working primarily in video installation.

**Amanda Bromfield** is a ceramic artist living and working in Lennox Head in Northern NSW. Amanda's work focuses on women and has drawn inspiration from both French Rococo and the works of the Angry Decade artists of Australia in the 1950s.

**Holly Macdonald** is an emerging artist based in Sydney. Macdonald completed her BFA in Ceramics at the National Art School Sydney in 2014. Her practice combines free-hand drawing and hand building in clay to investigate the uncertain nature of perception.

**Katy B Plummer** works in video, installation and textile. She is interested in bathos, violence, radical politics and personal revolution.

**Madeleine Preston** is an artist, and writer who thought that meant curating would be easy. She was wrong. She is currently unfettered by ties to art Kapital but hopes this will change.

**Rachael McCallum** is an emerging artist based in Sydney, Rachael is out to fight the boring. Working in various media across disciplines of ceramics, painting, drawing and photography, Rachael takes an experimental approach in her practice to continually question everyday values and expectations. Each stage of her processes affects the following decision, searching for a balance of chaos and control.

**Eloise Rankine** is a Sydney-based artist who works predominately between ceramics and drawing, often combining the two to create intricately carved porcelain bottles. She studied ceramics at the National Art School and currently works and teaches at kil.n.it experimental ceramics studios, Sydney. She is currently undertaking a Masters in Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney

**Ashley Scott** is an artist & musician based in Sydney. He creates music, art and devices to try and promote reflective or critical thinking about history and living in both the sensory world and human society.

**Bev Shroot** used to make documentaries. This is her first film work in three years and she appreciated the process of creating a short work to tell the story of The State Porcelain Factory. She now works as an arts producer delivering large-scale art projects for independent artists.

**James Beighton & Emily Hesse**  
**Madeleine Preston**  
**Eloise Rankine**  
**Debbie Pryor**  
**Lucy Hawthorne**

## WRITERS

**James Beighton** is a curator and researcher. **Emily Hesse** is an artist. Together they are joint initiators of New Linthorpe, an ongoing project that asks how clay can be used as a medium for engendering change. Every evening they tell stories.

**Lucy Hawthorne** is a Hobart-based writer and artist with a PhD on site-specific art. She works as a researcher and library assistant at Mona (Museum of Old & New, Hobart).

**Madeleine Preston** is an artist, and writer.

**Debbie Pryor** is a curator and writer trained in ceramics and glass. Her practice follows the trajectory of craft within Australia. She is particularly focused on topics around materiality and is interested in the contemporary concerns of clay.

**Eloise Rankine** is a Sydney-based artist who works predominately between ceramics and drawing, She is currently undertaking a Masters in Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney

